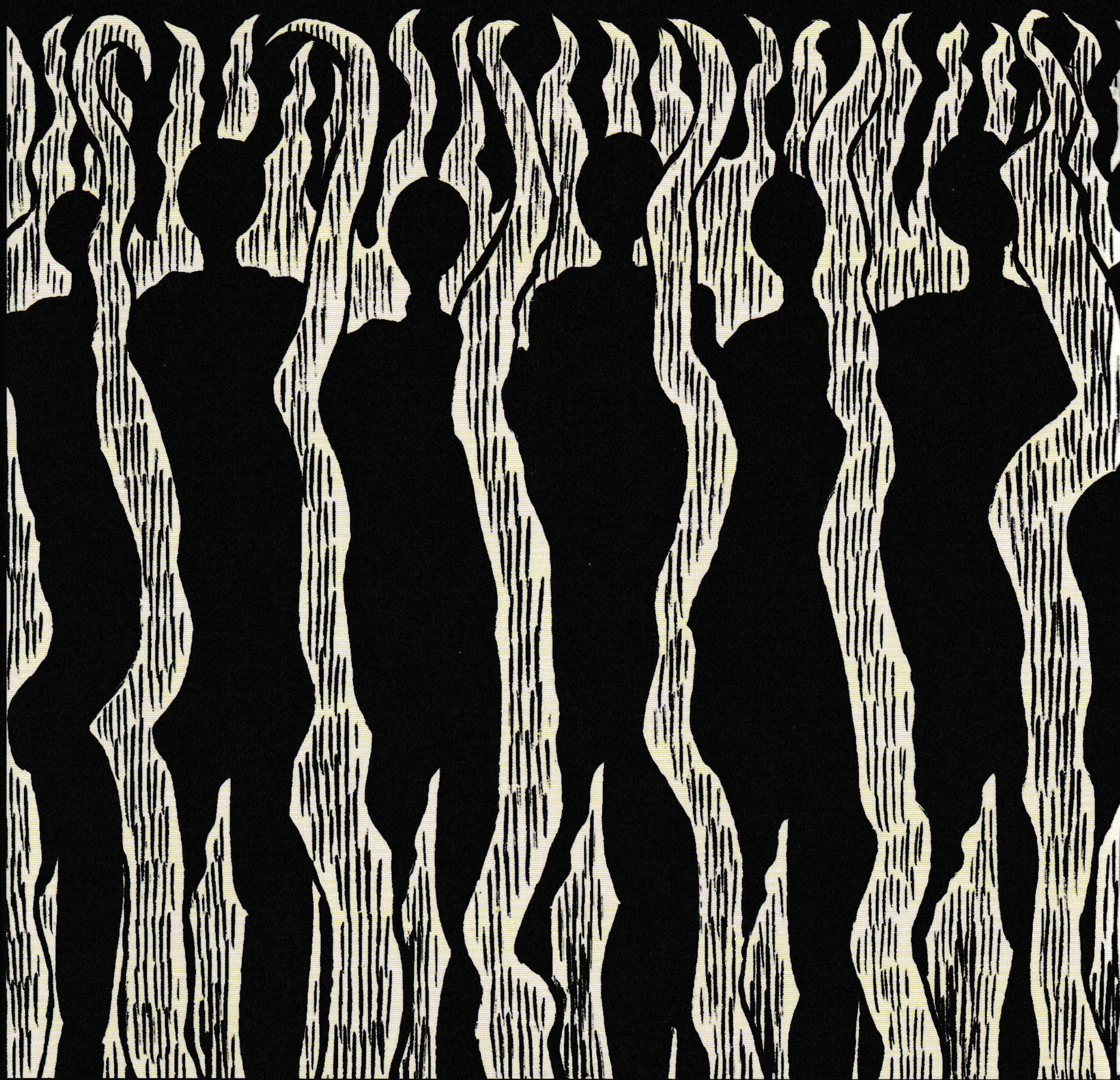
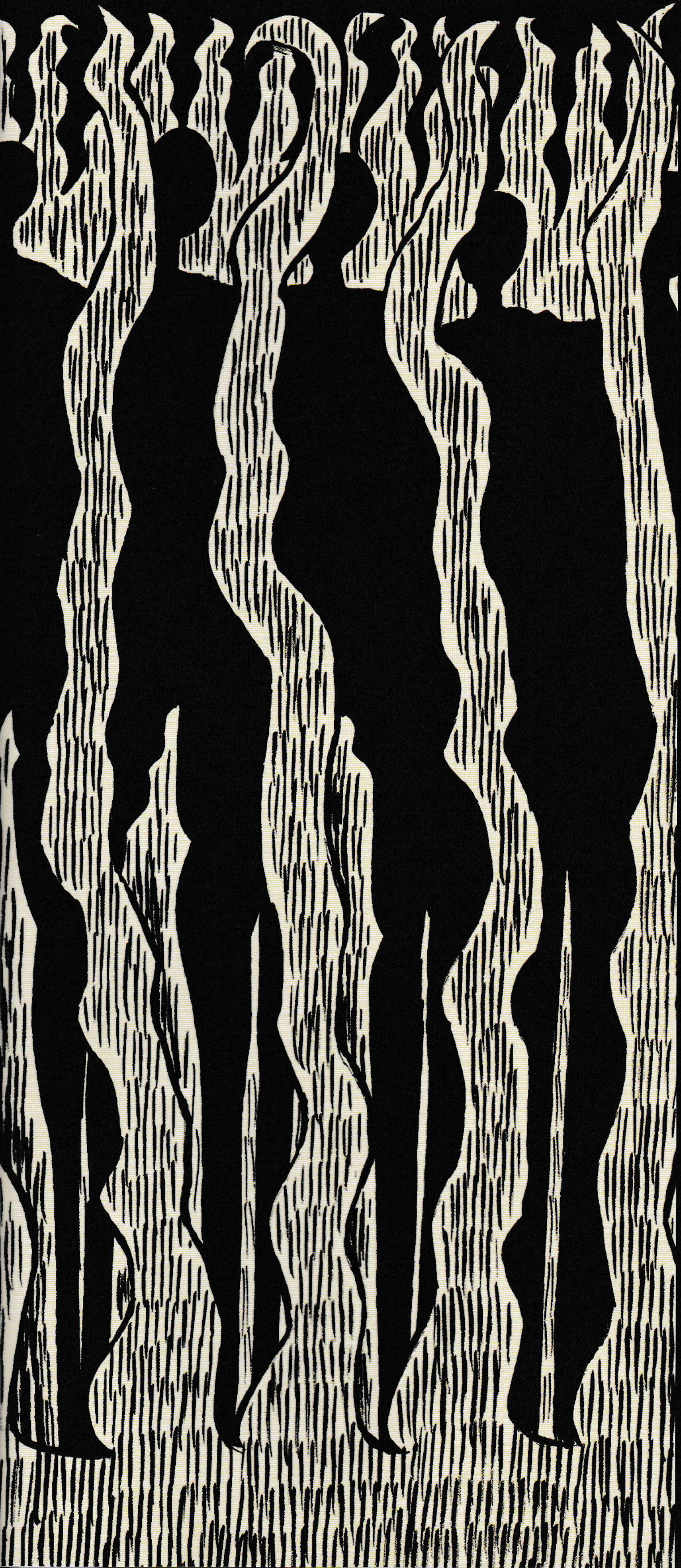


PICTURES OF APOCALYPSE

THOMAS LIGOTTI



PICTURES OF APOCALYPSE

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THOMAS LIGOTTI

ILLUSTRATED BY
JONATHAN DENNISON

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"I thought so much was left and so much time
To praise and call The Inmost Light . . ."
"Big boys, check it out: too *fucking* late."
David Tibet, *The Inmost Light*

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INTRODUCTION

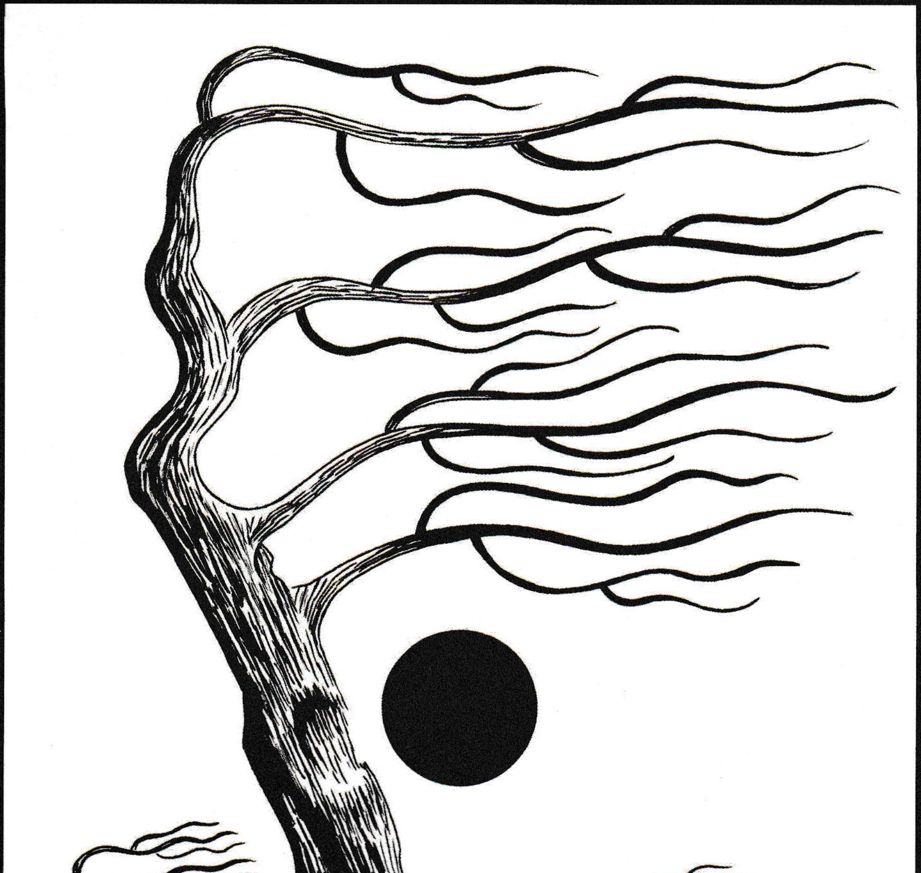
For good or ill, all things must end. And the peculiar modalities of this end, both for each of us as individuals and for the motley aggregate of our species, are quite literally incalculable. All the same, a few foreglimpses are not impossible to offer the curious. These are hypothetical imaginings for those who have been too lax or craven to conjure them on their own. By putting one's mind to the task, however, it seems that certain rules and conventions relating to the cataclysmic as a general proposition do reveal themselves without excessive strain or harm. Traditionally, some depictions of apocalypse are more predominant than others in histories, revelations, and intuited expectations of the end. For example, there is likely an element of the unheard-of in each one, a quality of the unearthly in phases ranging from the subtly dreadful to the outrageously sensationalistic. Yet, while *bizarrerie* may be amusing and a relief from boredom, when it comes to an ultimate termination the usual predilection is for a total blowup, an explosion or vaporization fully and forever. And, for the most part, apocalyptic promises tend to take this form. A good encyclopedia or a repository of relevant scriptures are helpful in this regard, providing illustrations of conclusive tempests of butchery and havoc leaving naught but vacant wastelands behind them.

But there are other renditions of apocalypse that are at odds with those delineated above. These involve scenarios wherein groups of stragglers hang about in a setting of inanity with a bit of décor, either survivors of or latecomers to oblivion. Consequently, the entire business is left unfinished, because some have been overlooked, actors who for a time play out a prelude to the Great Going. Since no wholesale apocalypse has ever been visited on this world, predictions that *everything* will be torn to pieces are but conjecture, however devoutly wished for. Thus, we must question whether any purported "end" is ever complete, except perhaps in whispered fables and fabrications—swindling us with apocalypses by halves and quarters, even ones that involve a single ill-fortuned loner. Therefore, we may be disappointed by a given picture of apocalypse, pained that it leaves anything at all in its wake, so that each presents an all-consuming shockwave smashing the whole thing to bits that drift into the primal blackness—a genuine finality. Then again, they are in no way restrained from going to the limit with something that by definition is fatality itself, producing a gruesome *ta-da* for those who like that sort of thing.

In the end, so to speak, it might be asked: Should we fabricate representations of apocalypse, as we have done so often over the centuries? This question is, of course, infinitely debatable. Perhaps more to the point: Should we wallow in such fantasies, as we unquestionably have done over the centuries? One reason we should—not the only one, but the only one pertaining to the pages that follow—is that all is not right with the world . . . and when all is not right in every detail imaginable, then some will find solace (bitter as it may be) in a lusty imagining of the end. They may not deserve this solace, as many would hoot, but opinions vary on who deserves what in any world conceivable. Why someone would believe that all is not right with the world is anyone's guess, or their self-arrogated judgment concerning what is right or not right with anything at all. Still, there are these pictures of apocalypse on offer, and even though these pictures are only inventions, we might argue that by virtue of their being invented, because a consciousness exists sufficiently educated in endings, which, it should be divulged, will involve anguish, all is not right. It is—to put it kindly—deficient, defective, blemished to its core. It is faulty to such a degree that it would be no more than just and honest to exclaim that nothing is right, properly speaking. Thus, what is the point in equivocating? The pictures are there, one apocalypse followed by another—great or small, indefinite or definitive. They have already been inserted into existence, as built-in as breath and the end of breath.

Given the succession of horrors with which we have been intimate for so long, we may infer that no endpoint will be a beatific release from the pain we have always known. No apocalypse will be anything but awful. And nothing more need be said. It only remains to pass around the pictures.

The
End
# of an
Era



I

At the end of an era
changes begin to take place.
Your sense of time is affected,
as when one day feels like another.

The only difference, you discover,
is that this misperception
now seems to be abiding.
An odd but not serious threat
to the old order in itself,
time being a fungible affair,
a quantity cognate to space,
divisible into chapters,
exchangeable as currency
between variant lands.
Yet at the end of an era
such temporal vagaries
should not be taken lightly.

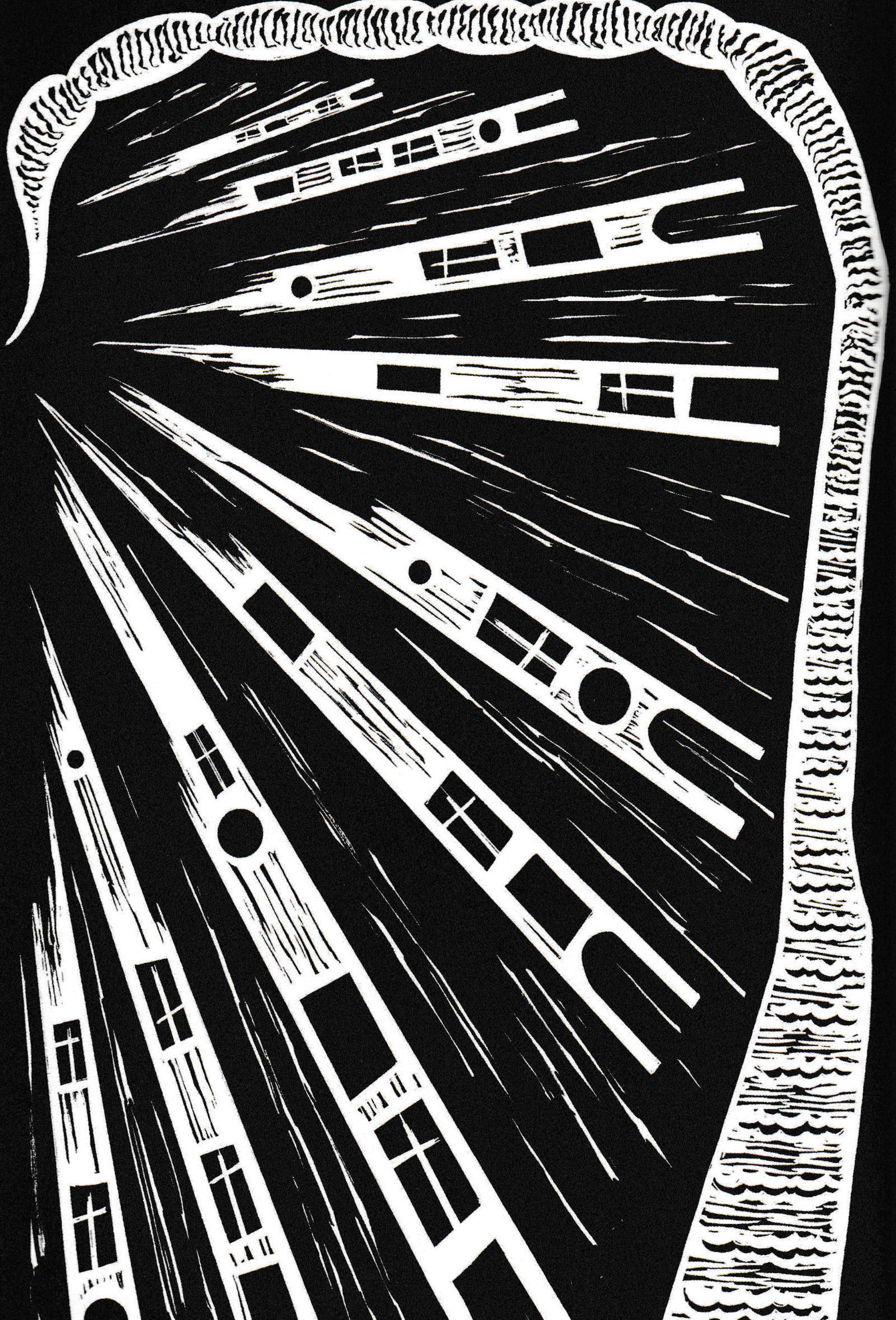
At the end of an era
the weather may turn out of season.
Trees that were lush with leaves
just the day before
are skeletal the next morning.
They look stricken by palsy
and quiver against a pale sky,
their branches seeming to warn
of a coming catastrophe.
You know an era is ending
when the changes begin ringing
evermore drastically out of tune,
as the transfigurations quicken,
following one another with dire alacrity.
Then all you can do is wait and hope.
But at the end of an era,
as anyone knows

who knows anything at all,
hope is useless, even harmful.
That much is apparent,
pointedly so when faces appear
outside your bedroom window.
They grimace with hate,
and even when you close the shades
the faces are still there,
except now they are inside,
floating in the air.
You crush your eyelids tight,
and when you open them a little,
the faces are gone.
For a moment you calm down,
at least until you notice
what the faces left behind
here and there in your home—
tufts of hair various in size,
rusty nail-clippers, skeletons,
naked baby dolls, spoons,
and a pile of prosthetic devices.

You begin to laugh and scream
or do both of them at once.

Finally, you bolt out of the door
and go running into the street,
which is full of other people
who are also laughing and screaming
or doing both of them at once.
After all, this is the end of an era,
and they can do nothing about it
except what they are doing,
which is all you can do
and is what you must do
at the end of an era,
until you drop to the ground,
drop straight to the ground
and stay down, sink down—
down, down, down, down.
Because at the end of an era
you need to make space,
just as you need to make time,
yours being all used up.
This is simply how it is,
when another era begins, you see.

Closing Time



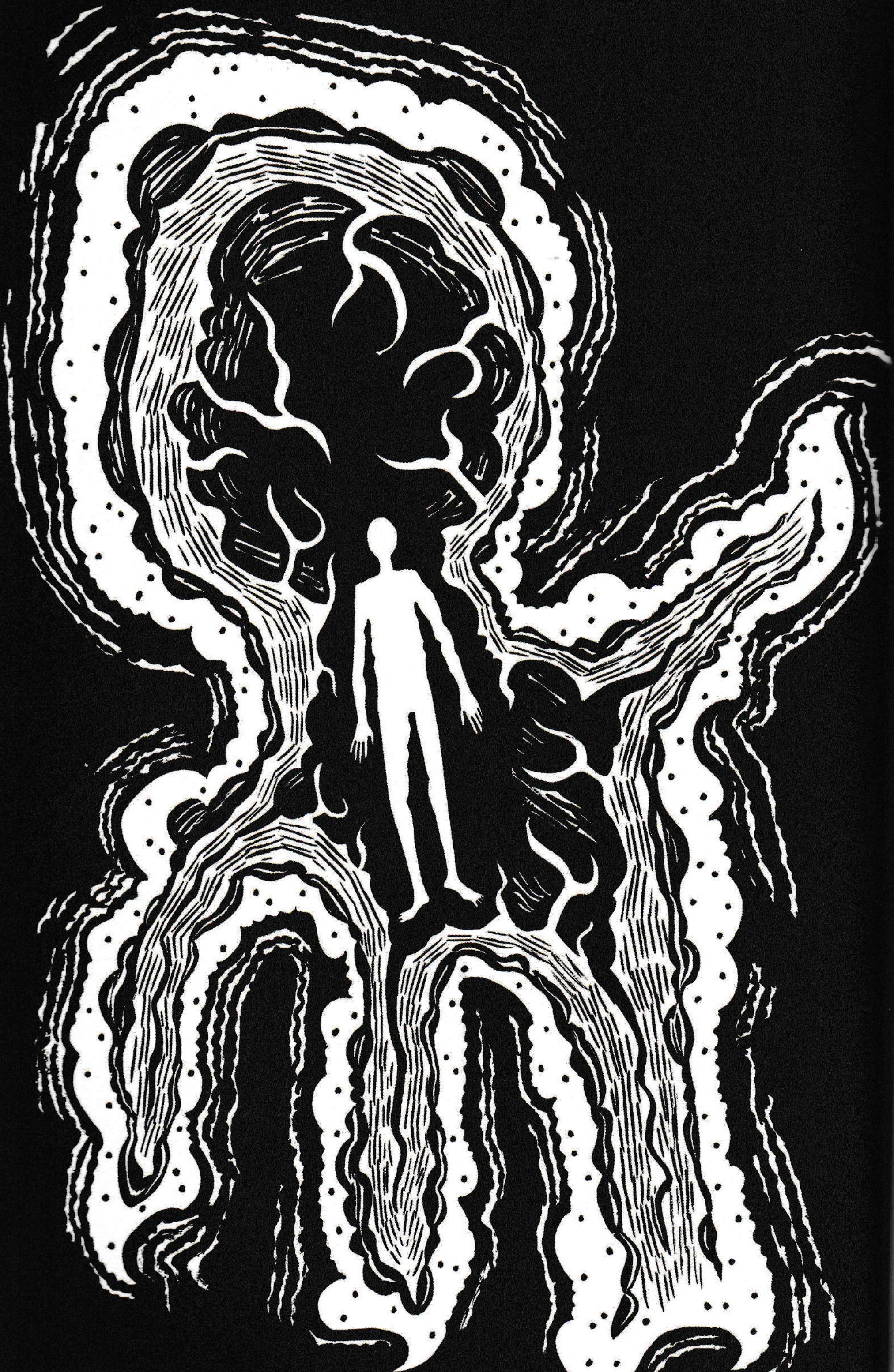
II

Beside the gray waters
of a thin canal
the promenade was deserted.
And yet there were indications
that only moments before
a normal state of affairs obtained.
For example, the outdoor tables
at an old and quite popular café,
which for generations, literally,
had been filled with customers
at all hours of the day and night,
were now empty of occupants.
Neither faithful patrons
nor the usual scrum of tourists
were anywhere in sight.
The only evidence of activity
at the old and popular café,
that is to say, normal activity,
were certain *mementos,*
as they might be called:
the remains of a slice of cake
or a cigarette still smoldering
in a well-used ashtray.

Many other things of this sort,
quite commonplace things,
could be seen everywhere
on the tabletops of the café.
But otherwise, and in every sense,
the place was deserted.
Impossible to know, or so it seemed,
why anything was left behind,
as if to say, by way of certain tokens,
that not long before, in that place,
the ordinary and everyday prevailed,
then suddenly came to an end.

Was there an incursion,
much like a cloudburst,
that had chased off
the occupants of the café—
an unforeseen, baleful incursion?
Or was it something else?
Whatever the reason,
there was no doubt
that it was closing time
on the promenade
beside the gray waters
of a thin canal.

The Awakening



III

After a long slumber undisturbed by dreams,
the earth is aroused by the drama of Evolution.
Born in the fitful stirrings of spreading slime,
life reached out to life—and then to us.

Looking back at the *original defilement,*
very few, almost none, are troubled by it.
We close our minds to those ages of inception
from a primordial mucous to apish marauders.

Indeed, we bless each sluggish step to our rise,
our epic crawl over the cadavers of the extinct.
An exquisite mutation, a reasonless miracle,
we dance on the summit of creation while we can,
mindless of making some dreadful misstep
or simply sinking into the oblivion of a new night.

A
Poetics
of
Existence

IV

We had grown tired of the cycle:
beginning, middle, and end,
beginning, middle, and end,
beginning, middle, and end.

Now we forego the beginning,
cut the middle to a minimum,
and put a quick end to it—
before it puts an end to us.

Omega

V

The stopwatch began ticking
before any being could hear it
or anyone could comprehend
what this ticking was all about.

How many eons until this ticking,
this incessant, universal racket ends
and returns us to the original peace?
Tick-tick, tick-tick, tick-tick . . . tick.

The Cult of Melancholy

VI

The sky above us was streaked with veins,
winding like rivers of color, sickly pale,
or snakes slowly writhing in the grayness—
dying in sluggish spasms, spastic slithering,
iridescent rainbows left by corrosive tempests,
melting and ravaging annihilated landscapes.

Every so often a villager would appear, shouting
through the high bars of the monastery gate,
begging for illumination before the end of all.
Sometimes we filed out to meet with them,
smiling and nodding until they shuffled away,
bodies dissolving before they made it very far.

Unaffected, we returned to a useless sanctuary,
our dark robes flapping in the rising winds.
Screams echoed in the distance, mad voices,
whirlwinds of pleading from their scriptures.
Of course, our fate would be the same as theirs,
the only difference being we were past caring.

True, it was best to have it over and done with.
Still, there was something sad about it—so sad.

Obstructions

to a

Dream

VII

The apocalypse was overdue.
All the signs had come and gone,
and with them our wispy hopes
to forestall an utter nightmare.

When an end is inevitable,
and this is always the case,
the most we can do is prepare—
to mitigate foreseen grotesqueries.

Only in dreams do we defeat destiny.
Only in dreams can we control chaos.
But all our dreams now lay in ruins,
and must have been forbidden, impossible.

We thought our hopes to be modest:
to stand in the scattered debris of life
with a smile on our stupid faces,
or what was left of those we had.

But what can be done when you find
the apocalypse has a dream of its own?

To No End

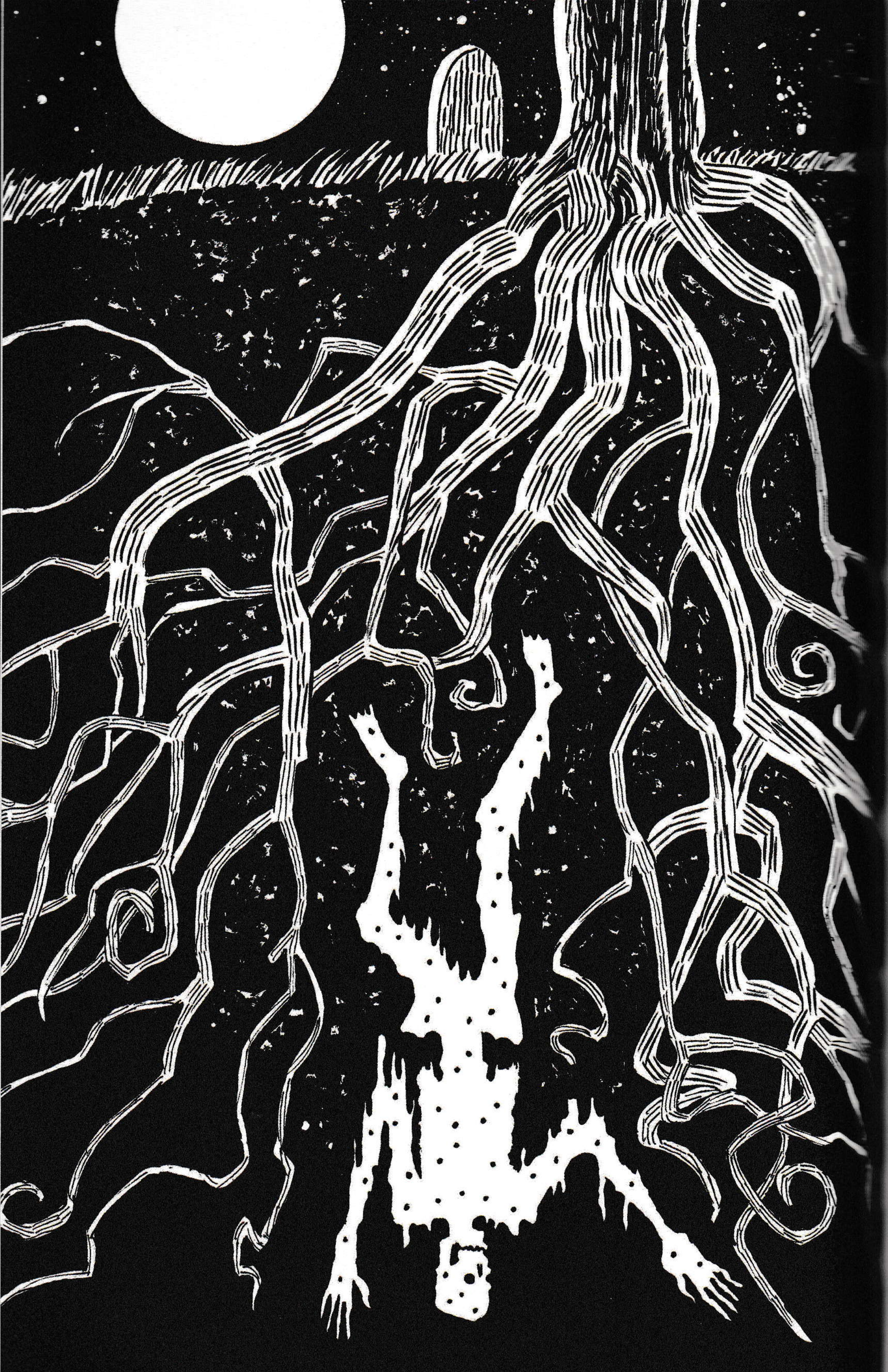
VIII

We said no prayers
that were prayers to say
in an empty place
that was not a place.

Like statues we stood
for a space of time,
saying no prayers
that were prayers to say.

It was a shame, we said,
it must end this way
in a place without time,
an end without end.

Salutation for Time



IX

So good to see you.
We thought you had forgot
and would never get here,
being detained by who knows what?
Going so soon? We had hopes . . .
but never mind—as you say,
time is wasting indeed,
and goodness knows, so are we.

Mystery

X

Where is the season
of leaves falling slowly—
rustling, shriveling?
Where is the person
who loved dead magic
and desolate twilights?

Gone.

In Anguish to the End

XI

Suffering makes you strong.
That's a fact, yes, that's a fact.
And if it doesn't, make pretend.
Be strong if it kills you
and be praised all the more.

Writers on the subject,
if asked, will agree to a one
that not to know suffering
is another way to suffer
and no way to live, you see.

You can live without pleasure
but not without pain.
With broken legs you dance.
With broken legs you dance.
With broken legs *you*—dance!

Damn the Cost

XII

There is a toll we must pay
to a dark, malignant spirit,
a presence sensed but not seen
that appears at our birth
and follows us all our days.

It takes so much, that spirit,
It turns a profit on our every loss,
giving nothing back but dread.
And when all we have is finally gone,
it begins to feast upon our future.

If anything is left at the end,
that lurid presence, sensed not seen,
takes that, too, like a piece of filth,
and throws it into the dustbin of time,
the garbage heap of space whence it came.

A Private Apocalypse

XIII

Even those whose residence
is cramped and without comforts,
with faulty lighting and defective plumbing,
may become attached to their lodgings,
sometimes profoundly so.

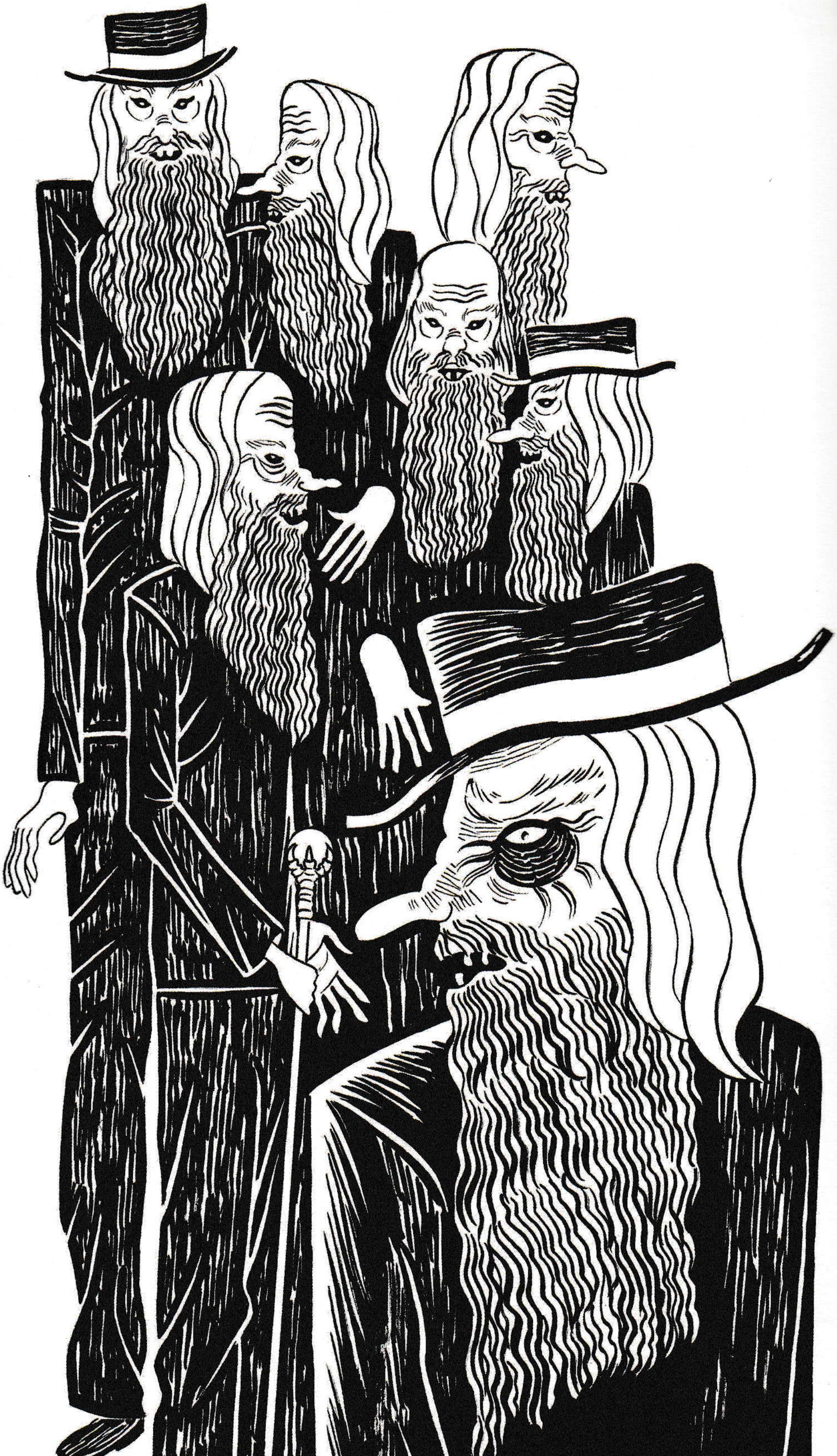
One may wonder what keeps them in place,
resigning them to their inconveniences
such that they remain unknowing
of a single moment absent of unease.
Even those may be held so tight
by their long intimacy with distress
that only an all-out rupture of their reality
can shake them loose from their abode.

What is it that holds them to the awful,
the terminally dreadful conditions,
that are their inexplicable lot?
Can they not simply open the door,
with its loose, rattling handle
and paint peeling from top to bottom,
then step outside into more agreeable spaces,
free from the grasping addiction to their hell,
no longer fastened by some queer need,
a craving perhaps for arcane delights proffered
by moldy floorboards and grimy windows?

All in all, though, there may be some explanation,
a solution to their unwillingness or inability
to embrace a salvation that awaits them.
Yet quite often, almost always, the path is hard
and cannot be taken by sheer will alone.
In that case, all these unfortunates can do is wait.
For sometimes redemption does arrive,
a saving eminence issuing from the shadows, that
delivers them from their entrapment.

Quite frequently that is their hope, their only way
to end their desire to be gone, to escape
the derangement and confusion that persists
not only around them but also within them— an
agony to which they awake each day
and anticipate every night of their lives.
Lacking courage to save themselves,
they may dream of being saved, strangely so,
by the very surroundings that are their torment. If
only those ragged curtains closed to the world
might stretch out and encircle their throats,
squeezing the life out of them in mere minutes.
Certainly, that could be endured
in order to secure a better place to call home.
And so they wait . . . and they wait
until they are moved out of their prison
in some other and inevitable way,
and more likely terrible than not.

Armageddon Comes to Cutter



XIV

They spoke with quiet voices about *something in the air*—
a pervasive presence unseen blighting our town.
And they spoke as incessantly as they did quietly.
At times I thought I would go mad, so I recall,
for what they said I had long thought and longer feared.

I listened only, my silence gaining me suspicion,
even at times a wary glance or a heavy silence.
They seemed to enjoy an adversarial give and take,
welcoming the distraction of rumors
to the brute disclosure of actuality.
Naturally, this made them mean in spirit.
Thus, I put up my guard, keeping my own counsel,
careful neither to scorn nor invite allies,
for I was no less suspicious than were they
of disingenuousness on all sides.

It took time to perceive with confidence
whether anything but words upheld that talk
of something in the air, a ubiquitous presence,
or even a presence within absence itself.
And then began the transfiguration
of both the town and of its talkers.
In retrospect, I could not but admire
and even defer to the wisdom of their words,
and the spiritual courage, the numinous might,
that preceded the material incident,
which someone called "The Cutter Tragedy."

Like any place devoted to the ordinary,
Cutter was not a sanctum, so to speak,
for one who sought to arouse himself
from a nightmare of folly and wretchedness.
It was just another black garden of the wrong,
a specimen of all that the world thought right.
Yet no crime attended its being made as it was made,
or none I thought proper to such a grave fortune.

In the end, confirmation came of something in the air,
something that came to settle at Cutter, a presence
that made a home of the town's streets and structures,
as well as a companion, in its way, of the local citizens.
The manner of this settlement was transformative.
In the annals of Armageddon, it was perhaps not unique.
I cannot speak with authority on the subject.
Implemented was a magic that caused the shops,
the houses, along with the residents of Cutter,
to collapse or flow into a mad shapeless mass.
Unfortunately, none remain to give first-hand testimony.

Only later, many years later, did I learn of Cutter's fate,
since I had left the place of my birth as year by year,
then day by day, the signs became more and more clear.
I heard of the Cutter tragedy in legend for the most part,
and here and there in talk about something in the air.

Now it seems nowhere is safe: transubstantiation is ongoing—
nothing more horrible or inevitable than the move to evolve,
to take what is behind the mask and place it at the forefront.
That is the heart of all stories, and of all illuminations, I assert,
of who we are and what is happening in our native abode.
Alas, everything dies . . . but never in time.

Eternal Deliquescence

XV

To linger in a prolonged apocalypse,
savoring the end—not shrinking
from that distinguished horror,
uncowering before the grim inevitable.

One would have ghosts for companions,
their faces drawn, faded by the exertion
of walking the earth, but perhaps consoled
by the sight of that earth's demolition.

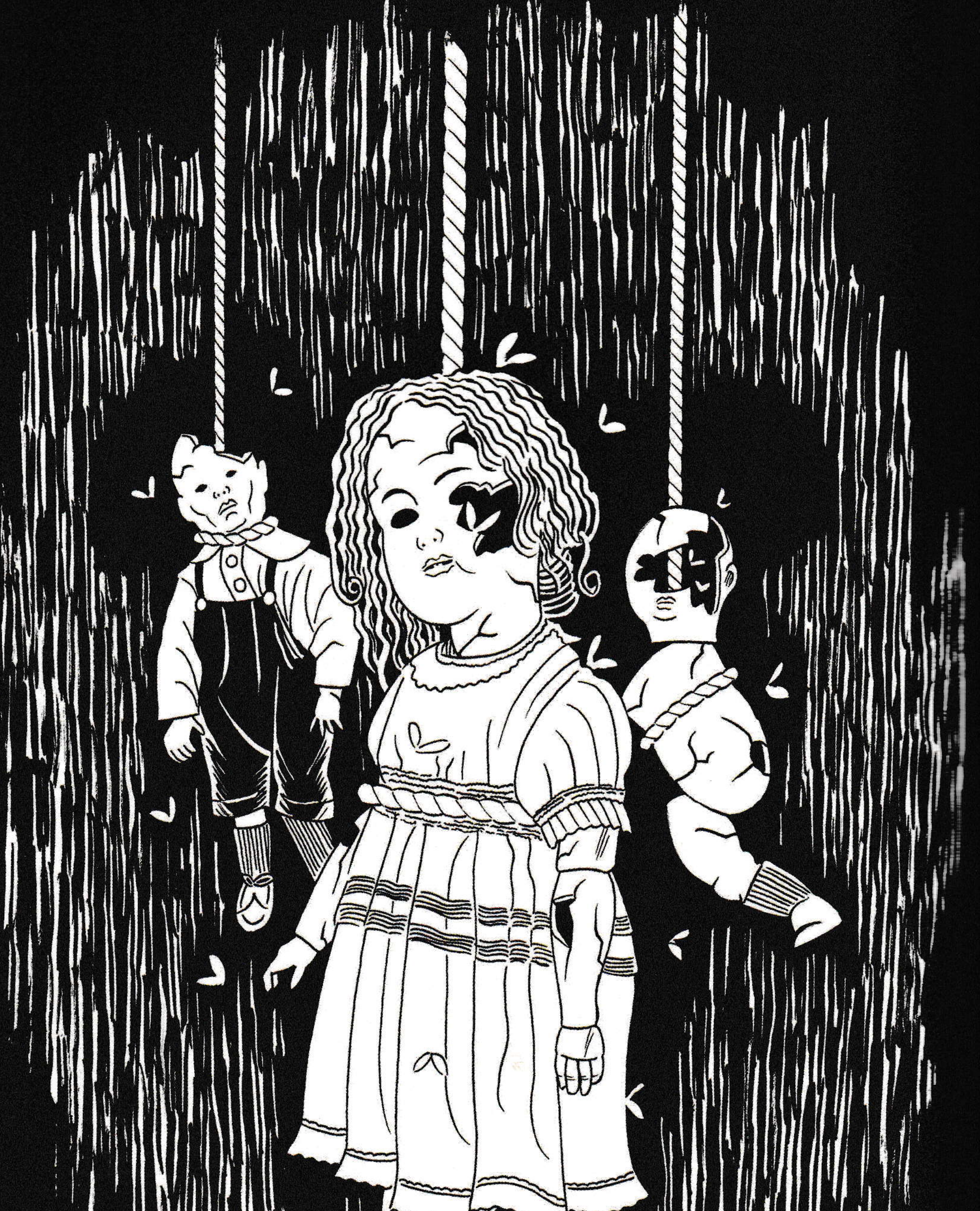
It may seem deplorable, perversity itself,
wishing to witness eternity forestalled,
self-possessed before scenes of eradication
with a pink carnation in my buttonhole!

There would be coruscations in blackness,
twisted formations in silhouette,
landscapes roaring in all registers of collapse,
a symphony of devastation for my delight.

Would that such an enduring interim could exist
between the routine carnage of a botched creation
and its well-merited, blazing expiration
so long in the making and too long overdue.

Would that I might revel unfazed, serene,
at the cosmic fulminations, the infinite wreckage,
and the consummation of a destined end:
the noisome maw of an ever-devouring abyss,
blackness at feast—a picture to behold—
as all swallows all, choking on the scraps . . . forever.

Turn and
Turn About,
Little
Dolls



XVI

A twisting lane led
to an old house
with dolls in the windows,
while others on ropes
hung from the gutters.

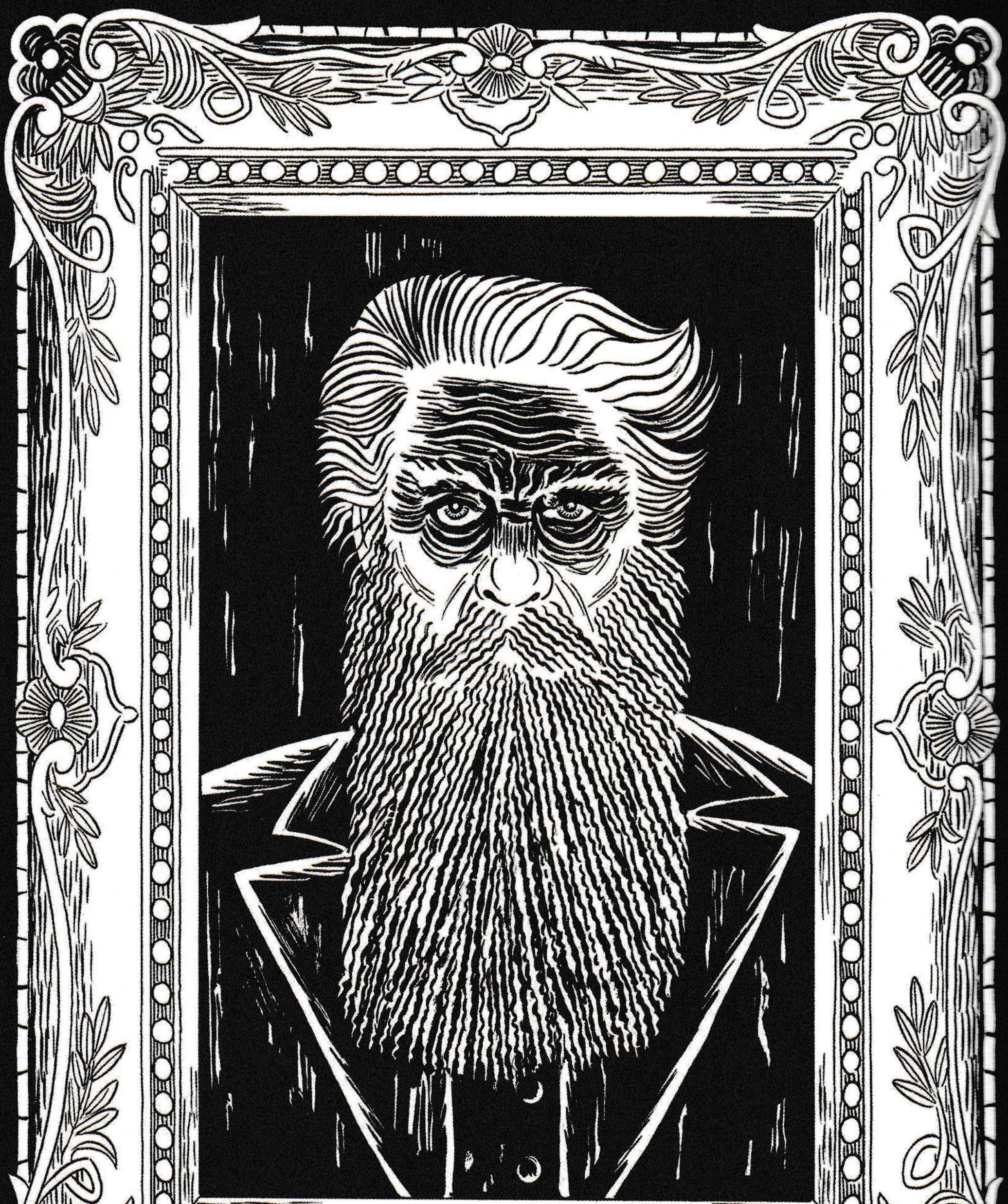
People came from afar
to stare at the place,
standing so still
in that twisting lane,
until they all faded.
So many people gone.

But more kept coming
who stood still as well,
then faded away—
no longer outside
standing in the lane,
staring at the house.

And it kept happening.
So many lured back
to where they began,
melding into those dolls,
looking out the windows
or hanging from the gutters
of the infinitely old house.

They were safe now.
All was over for them,
or so one could only hope.
To ponder any other fate
would be too much to bear.
Mere dolls dangling,
alive and aware in some way,
swaying madly in the wind,
hoping for an apocalyptic rescue.
Hoping the last days will not be the worst,
and hoping no more will come after.

Mental Notes on the End of Days



XVII

1

I am having my portrait painted in an elaborately appointed room,
one of many in the main house of my family's ancestral estate.
One day it will hang upon a great wall of another room with a stairway,
an immense, winding affair leading to the upper reaches of this house.

While I sit for my portrait, my son walks into the room and nods my way.
He stays for only a moment or so, watching the artist at work.
Someday he will also have his portrait painted, fate willing.
And it will be hung on the same wall with mine and our ancestors',
taking its place in our familial gallery in a distinguished way.

After surveying his father as he would some poor soul in Bedlam,
my son smiles in his somewhat mechanical fashion and walks off.
In truth, I am mentally unbalanced and have been for years.
This is simply one of the drawbacks of being equipped with a brain,
which is subject to dysfunction like any other anatomical system.

Although I am heir to substantial wealth and its accoutrements,
such that the world demands nothing of me nor I of it,
I was once a neurologist of note in the early days of this profession.
Now I am sitting for my portrait like any other man of means,
so that one day my image will hang on a wall in a distinguished way.
At first, I feared this sitting might perturb my brain into a worsened state.
However, I now accept all risk so that my portrait will hang upon that wall,
for I have come to understand what those paintings have to reveal.

2

Indeed so: There is another side to the pageantry of portraiture,
something beyond egoism and even the miserable brain itself.
The secret, as I discovered entirely by chance, is in those cracks,
the webwork of thin fractures that appears in the older faces,
riddling their surfaces into something like writing on ancient papyri.
Therein is an intricate language that I sedulously learned to decipher.

Often, I stand upon the stairs beside that wall studying the little cracks,
knowing that I have penetrated a voluminous hidden scripture,
yet one that is outrageously conspicuous in what it has to unveil.
I do this by candlelight at late hours, transfixed by the old paintings,
until someone in the house comes to rush me off to bed like a child.

I can only wonder about the authors of this truly occult writing.
Only with laborious gazing at the old paintings did I make the discovery:
Within those tiny cracks that spread like a network of ganglia,
deep in those spindly arteries is a dark world that wildly flourishes.
And strange as it may seem, therein is a dimension of entities—
a universe that exists in tandem with our own, or what we call our own.
These practically invisible entities I would describe as*specters with dead
eyes* , although they are certainly not dead in the sense we use this term.
I know this, because when I look into those eyes they look back at me.

In addition, there is a style of phraseology in their language,
a way of writing that emphasizes their spectral nature, that is to say,
their existence as essentially psychical rather than physical.
And it is in relation to this point that their peculiar script is concerned.
Nothing else seems to matter to them aside from their spectral nature
or even spectrality itself as opposed to any other manner of being.
It is at this juncture that I will summarize what I principally derived
from these specters and what now means everything to me.

3

In the dark language scribbled across those portraits on that great wall
I now understand what no one and nothing in my life has ever taught me.
There is a prophecy written on the paintings in question—that family gallery.
But it is not simply a prophecy adumbrating my family's future. Neither is it
strictly relevant to my son and me nor to earlier generations, those whose
patriarchs stare down from that wall in a distinguished way.

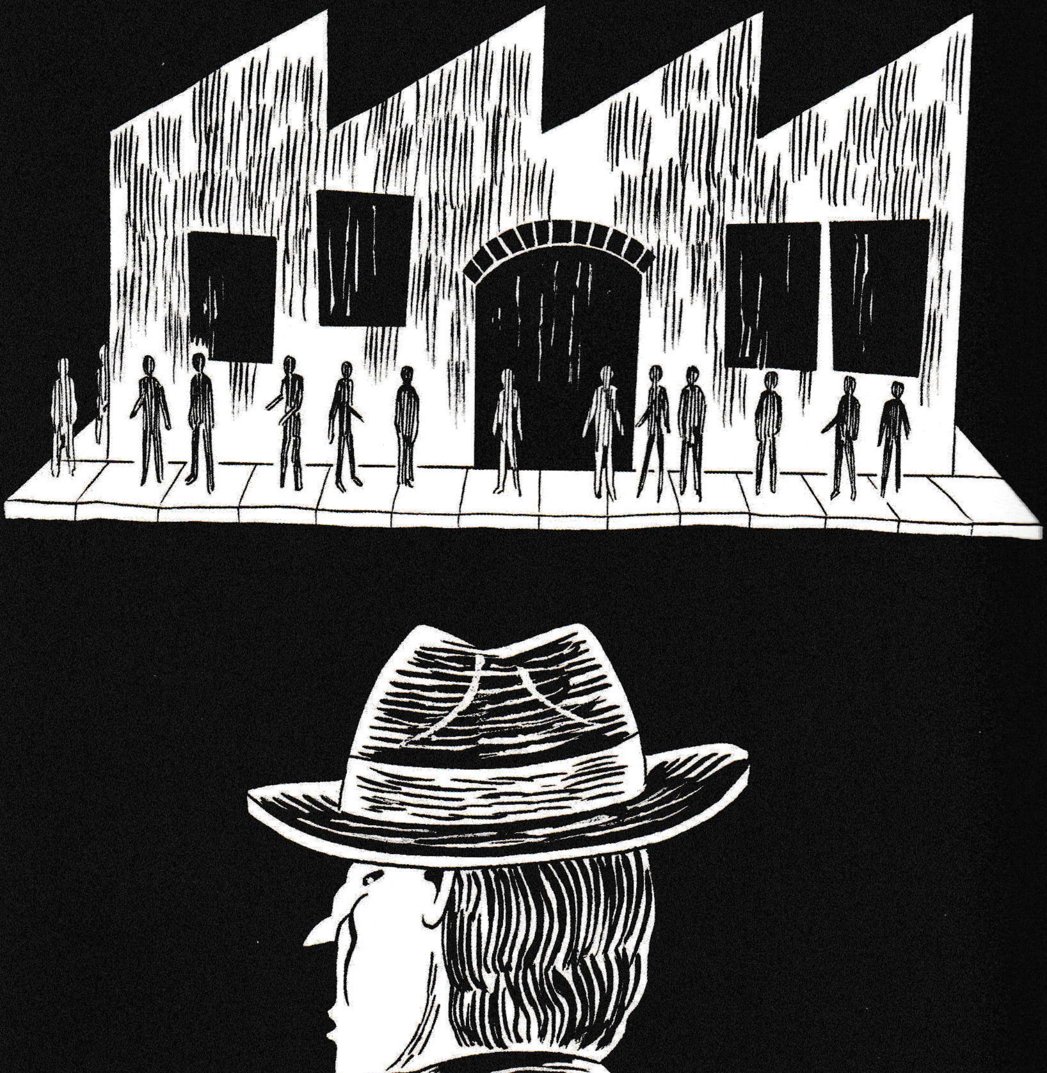
The prophecy relates to all generations of our race, present and future,
as the tiny prophets in the ever so tiny cracks of the older portraits—
the specters with dead eyes—have imparted to me in their own words.
They are *not* the ancestors of the family to which the rest of us belong.
But they will be its successors when each and every one of us is gone,
for they are spectral and unbodied, and thus exist in perpetuity—
without ancestors or successors, or so they have attested to my mind.

The time for bodies has run out—things of parts are fated for collapse,
foremost those molded from flesh, their connections always breaking.
These have been paraded before us, and we are sick with their visions.
I am sick, my son, as I sit here, silent, having my portrait painted.
The last words I have to tell you are these: I will see you on the wall.

Two Visitations

1

The Bag



XVIII

1

On a cloudy autumn day
you are walking the streets
of the town where you live.
Turning a corner,
you see a line of people
beside a nondescript building.
Down the street is an open doorway
and one by one each enters it,
and not long after they exit.

There is some excitement in the air,
and you are soon affected by it.
So you go to the end of the line
and slowly file forward
toward the open doorway.

In time, word passes back to you
that inside the nondescript building
is a man with a bag of some kind.
The bag, they say, is full of shadows,
moving shadows that seem alive,
not to mention sinister in some way.

More and more, your own excitement grows,
and you even join in with the others,
who are talking all kinds of nonsense
about the bag and the shadows.
Finally you reach the open doorway.

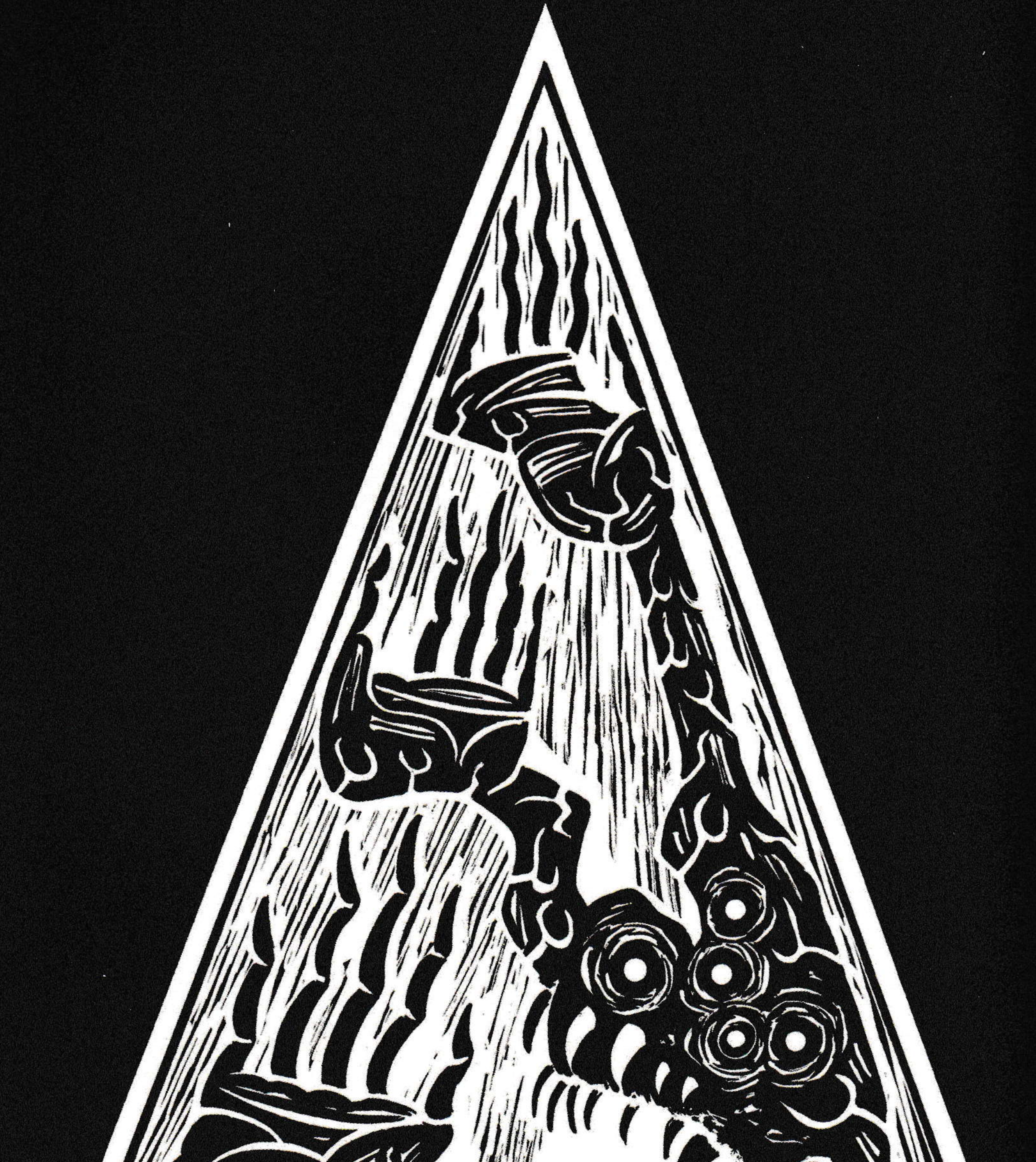
But before you can enter the building,
the door closes right in your face.
And on the door is a sign,
a dirty, cardboard sign,
with some words scribbled on it:
Out of business, they read.

Now your excitement flags.
You feel heavy, empty.
Never mind, you tell yourself:
It is not the end of the world.
What does it matter—
that you never saw inside the bag
as did all the others.

But on that cloudy autumn day,
with nowhere to go,
you cannot control your thoughts,
which keep converging
on the excitement you felt
as you stood waiting in line,
and how badly, how very badly,
you wanted at least a peek
into that bag of shadows.

2

The Tent



2

As you walk toward the horizon
of a treeless landscape,
there appears in the distance
what seems to be a mirage.

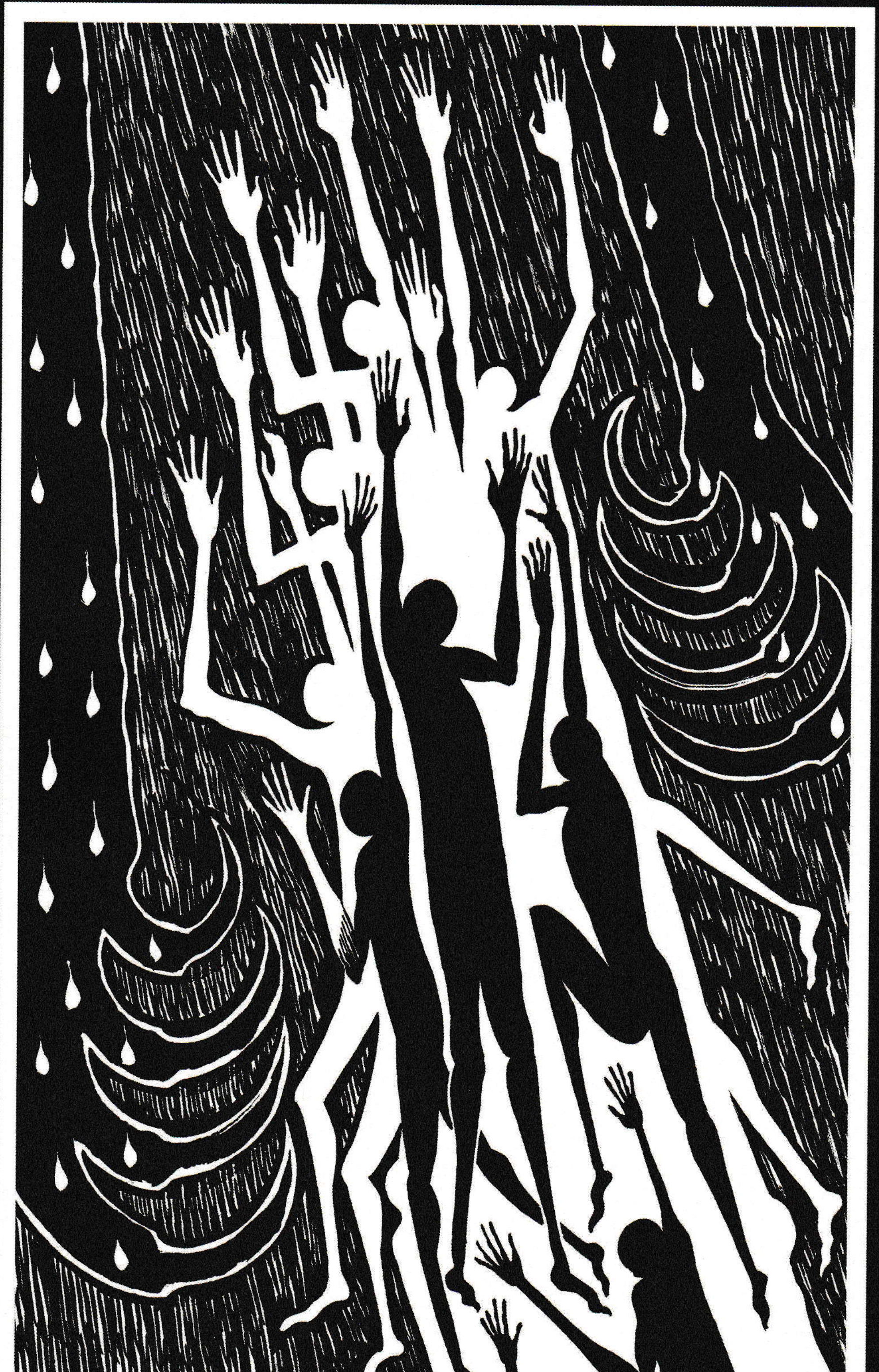
Being of a curious nature,
you make a determined approach
toward a tall, slack image
that has the look of a tent
left behind by a carnival.

Upon closer investigation
you see the structure's material
is not the canvas you assumed
but something of a living order.
And there are also sounds
coming from the thing—
a voice or voices, modulations
like nothing of this world.
And yet you understand,
you deeply receive in your soul
the pronouncement it makes,
the judgment it has come to exact.

And now you gain a notion
of what it is you behold—
a conception of its nature
and the revelation of its purpose.
You tremble with a sense of meaning,
a feeling you have never known before,
as the construction, the prodigy,
spreads itself out and elevates,
rising to the skies, higher and higher,
throwing a shadow, an enveloping darkness,
upon the treeless landscape and beyond.

Then into that shadow, that darkness,
you are taken up and taken away,
along with all else that exists
and all that might ever have existed.
Your final sentiment, luckily for you,
is not fear but an accepting reconciliation,
a soothing contentment born of the insight
that a great wrong is about to be made right.

An Appointment Foretold



XIX

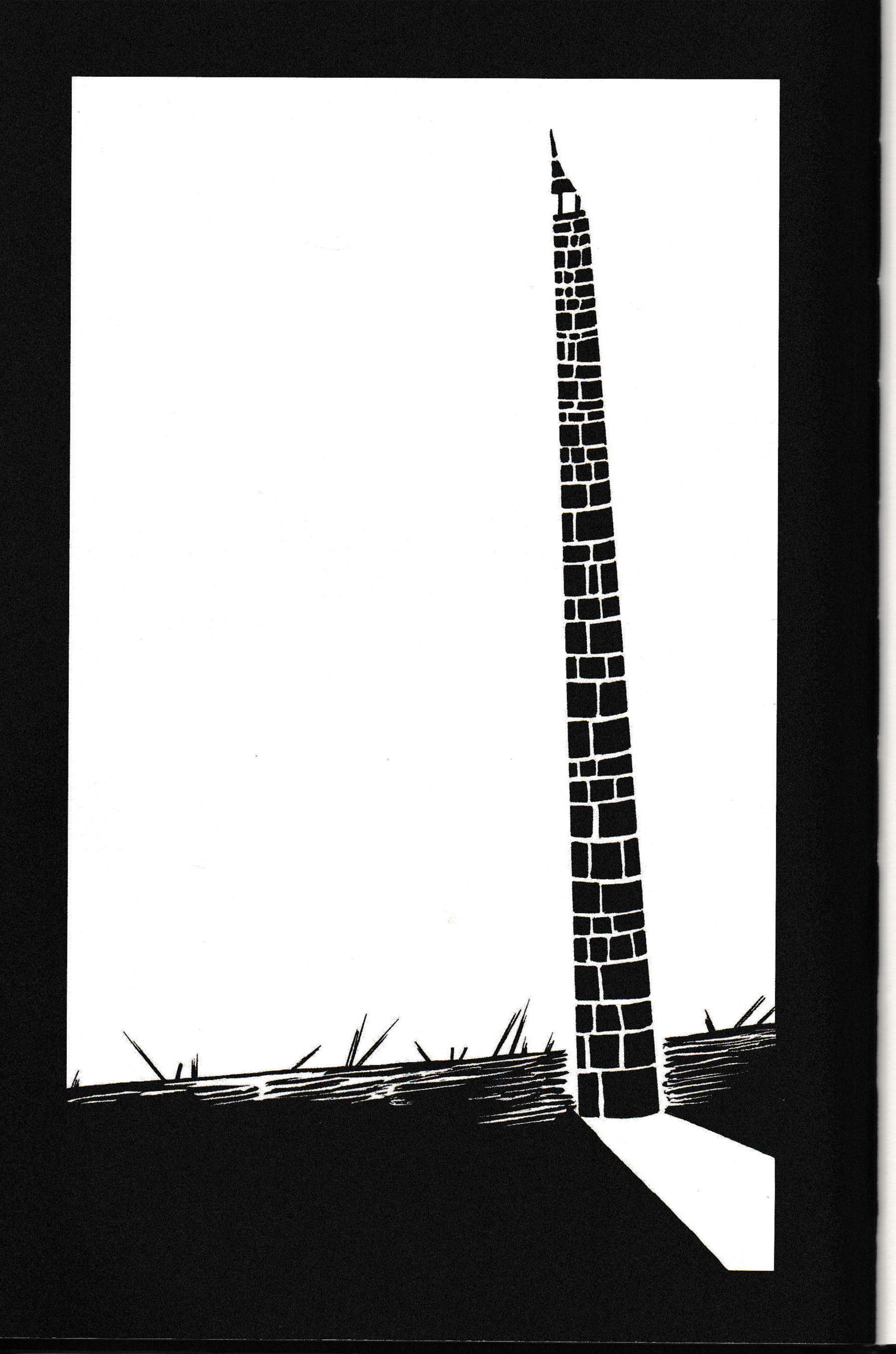
Nobody knew for sure how it would come.
It was not something we spoke about.
We only knew it would come as it would
and secretly dreaded it would be bad.
And as some had predicted, it was so—
beyond anything we could have conceived
either in our moments of composure
or in our most chaotically cursed nightmares.

It was a masterpiece of mayhem and horror.
All the lands were dappled with blood,
as if a crimson rain fell without cease.
And the disquiet, the insanity, the desolation.
These spread like a roaring flood, lightning-fast,
whipping us within as the tortures did without.
A refrain passed among us—*We are only flesh!*
But nothing heeded our voices, our hapless cries.
No face leaned forth grinning at our pain.
No puppet master appeared in the skies,
nor even laughter crackling from whirlwinds.
These would have lent some sense to the scene,
consoling us with the balm of gist and import.
But even they were denied us in our pain.

And when it was done, nothing was as it was.
It seemed to last an eternity, but in a blink was over.
For a time there was some movement in the ashes,
then all became still, and had we eyes to see
we would have groped for something sharp,
something with a point to put them out
or an edge to tear at our drooping throats.
But even these had been twisted or taken.

That all things must pass was once a platitude to us.
That they passed as they did was a vicious wrong,
the savage plundering of the little we once had.
And of us all there was nothing but sorrow.
And of us all there was nothing but anguish.
And of us all there was nothing but nothing.

Covenant



XX

I stand in my watchtower.
The apocalypse has come and gone.
Between me and the horizon,
that thin line glowing in the distance,
is an obliterated landscape
so beautifully barren,
so rich with bleak absence,
I wish I could weep.

Yet the time for weeping is done,
as I stand in my watchtower.
There is no joy like relief from pain.
No need now to think such things.
Only vigilance is required of me.
That is my sole practice.

And so I stand in my watchtower,
alert to any signs of life without,
any movement in the stillness
of that great empty plain
across which I stare,
over which I am guardian.
Never again, I vow—
Never, never, never, never.